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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [BL](#) [VE](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: BOLIVIA: BENI AND PANDO VOTE JUNE 1

REF: 07 LA PAZ 3220

Classified By: ECOPOL Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4(b), (d.)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The northern states of Beni and Pando will hold their autonomy referenda on Sunday, June 1st. There has been scattered violence resulting in injuries but no deaths between pro-government and pro-opposition/autonomy forces in the week leading up to the vote. Both groups have blocked travel by each other's leaders, including President Evo Morales. Although government efforts through publicly announced projects, giveaways, and under-the-table payoffs will reduce support for the vote, opposition contacts continue to predict comfortable margins in support of autonomy. Pando, with only 29,000 registered voters, is particularly vulnerable and targeted by the government, ostensibly with Venezuelan and Cuban support, according to our contacts. President Morales plans to visit Pando today in a last-minute push against participation. The government is already charging that both votes will be fraudulent. END SUMMARY.

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Beni Sitrep
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12. (U) On Thursday, May 29, thousands of Benianos gathered in Trinidad at a rally led by Prefect (governor) Ernesto Suarez, Trinidad Mayor Moises Shiriqui, and Santa Cruz Civic Leader Branco Marinkovic. Suarez and Shiriqui pushed for the "yes" vote and insisted that Beni is not looking for confrontation, only progress and development. Police sources confirm that 150 police officers landed in Trinidad and are prepared for riot control. Beni's second largest city, Riberalta, had some conflict Thursday, when a group of MASistas organized a march in the city. Border-town and key port city Guayaramerin faced a similar situation on Wednesday, when a pro-government marched through the city, denouncing the autonomy referendum. Pro-autonomy groups countered with rocks and sticks; the confrontation left 12 injured. Citizens in Guayaramerin blocked the landing of President Evo Morales on May 29, who was due to land in the border town to deliver goods and supplies. Last year, Riberalta used a similar technique to block a Venezuelan plane from landing (reftel).

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Pando Sitrep
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¶3. (U) A large pro-autonomy march and vehicle convey in Pando's capital of Cobija May 29 culminated in a series of speeches in the city's main square, despite a pro-government blockade of the city and airport. There were reports of injuries as opposing sides throw rocks at each other and engaged in shoving matches. Pro-government farmers prevented Prefect (governor) Leopoldo Fernandez from reaching the municipality of Filadelfia. Fernandez stated this week he hoped the autonomy votes could be used as leverage to restart dialogue and arrive at a national pact to resolve the national political impasse.

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Evo/Armed Forces Commander Play Good Cop/Bad Cop
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¶4. (U) President Evo Morales visited Pando's capital, Cobija May 30 in a last-minute attempt to encourage absenteeism on June 1. He distributed 15 ambulances to municipalities and announced new Pando development projects. Morales also gave away 60 computers to schools and 421 land titles to peasants during a May 25 Cobija trip and Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera visited Cobija May 23. To ensure Morales was not denied access, as was the case in Beni and Chuquisaca's capital of Sucre last week, Armed Forces General Luis Trigo declared that the military would "use their weapons" if attacked by civilians. Trigo added Morales has been "too tolerant" with the opposition and urged opposition groups to "think again" if they plan to disrupt Morales' travel plans. Morales, however, repeated that in cases of conflict with civilians, the armed forces and police are to "withdraw to prevent any confrontation," insulating himself from culpability for any subsequent violence. Morales' security team and 100 police reinforcements arrived in Pando May 29 and Morales' visit was proceeding without serious incident by 1400 May 30. Morales underscored his presidential "responsibility" to visit all regions in Bolivia, a clear message to opposition forces that would attempt to restrict his travel.

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What's at Stake?
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¶5. (C) Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera continued to insist the vote "has no legal effect" and is "just like Santa Cruz (referendum), a waste of money" May 30. The government has none-the-less committed a great deal of time and resources to ensure abstentions, belying such nonchalance. Despite government challenges of the vote's legality and significance, and that Beni and Pando only constitute five percent of Bolivia's population (four and one percent, or 430,000 and 75,000, respectively), the two departments joining Santa Cruz's successful autonomy vote poses a significant symbolic defeat for the government. Although the government continues to deny the significance of the May 4 Santa Cruz referendum, the autonomy victory undeniably gave the opposition momentum.

¶6. (C) With only an estimated 25,000 to 29,000 registered voters, the government has concentrated its efforts particularly in Pando to maximize the impact of its efforts. Additionally, an estimated 2,000 to 4,000 new voters registered since 2006 (range reflects differences between national and department electoral court figures) are more likely to support the government's position as they largely represent a new wave of indigenous Altiplano immigrants, a Morales base. Beni has an estimated 134,000 eligible voters, of which nearly 28,000 were added after 2006.

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Likely Outcomes: "Two More Goals" for Opposition
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¶7. (C) Congresswoman Margot Vargas, from a more rural Beni area, told EmbOff she predicted nearly 90 percent support for the Yes campaign. Senators from Trinidad, however, predict

closer to 70 percent. They noted, however, that an increasingly united front in the closing days of the campaign between the city government in Beni's capital of Trinidad and the prefecture (state government) could increase the margin.

18. (C) Pando opposition Senator Roger Pinto (PODEMOS) told PolOff the referendum would pass with a comfortable margin, although he acknowledged the vote in Pando would not be as overwhelmingly in favor of autonomy as Santa Cruz -- around 60 to 70 percent "if we are lucky and only because we worked hard at it." He said Beni would be perhaps 10 percent higher. Nevertheless, he asserted Beni and Pando victories would ultimately constitute "two more goals" against Morales, in addition to the Santa Cruz May 4 victory. The fact that the government expended so many resources and even threw in a last-minute Morales visit will only sweeten the victory by highlighting the government's desperation. "They can't say they ignored it (the referendum), as they pretended to do in Santa Cruz," Pinto commented.

PODEMOS Senator: "Desperate" GOB Campaign will Backfire

19. (C) Pinto asserted that although both sides are pushing hard in the final days of the referendum campaign, there would be no significant violence June 1. He maintained there would be less violence than in Santa Cruz because Pando, and to a lesser extent Beni, are less polarized and "our people are far more tranquil." He added, however, that he was concerned about "outsiders" being shipped in by the government particularly in Pando (Note: The opposition has also brought in outsiders, particularly from Santa Cruz civic, prefecture, and youth organizations that supported its autonomy vote. End Note.) But, one should not underestimate how hard and publicly the government was willing to fight the referenda in Pando and Beni, in contrast to Santa Cruz, when the government emphasized the illegality, illegitimacy, and irrelevance of the autonomy vote. Pinto asserted the more pro-active government strategy in Beni and Pando will backfire, as it will be seen as an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of all autonomy votes (including Santa Cruz retroactively.)

Prospects for Violence; Venezuelan/Cuban Influence

110. (C) Intelligence officers from Venezuela and Cuba have been confirmed to be in Trinidad by Mission employees but not in the numbers reported in Cobija. Trinidad NAS employee Roxana Dellien says that everything is calm now and that will remain the goal by the Prefecture. Some sources fear violence in Riberalta on Sunday, as there is to be a rally at 3 PM. Prefect Suarez' personal advisor told EmbOff that Suarez will vote early on Sunday, and will travel throughout the day, likely to Riberalta and Guayaramerin, to promote the "Yes" campaign. One of our staff on the ground held a meeting with the Chief of Police in Trinidad Friday, May 30. During the meeting, the chief received two phone calls, one from the Police Commander and one from a Vice-Minister. The police chief reported that they are fully prepared in Trinidad, however they do not expect violence in Yacuma, citing the low number of pro-autonomists. This is inconsistent with other sources, who fear rural areas such as Yacuma and San Borja similar to the Santa Cruz vote, are where much of the violence will occur.

111. (C) Lower House Deputy Ana Lucia Reis (protect), Pando's only congressional representative from the ruling MAS party, strongly advised that the Embassy send no officers to Cobija during the June 1 vote. (NOTE: Embassy will have no presence in Pando or Beni. END NOTE) She said "it is not the right time to suddenly sent someone" and that Venezuelan and Cuban agents are "all over" Beni and Pando, particularly in 10 MAS-friendly Pando municipalities. Reis said any USG presence would present foreign agents with an opportunity to label an American representative a conspirator.

Buying Votes Standard Practice in Pando

¶12. (C) Reis confirmed the MAS is paying people to withhold their national identity cards over the weekend (required to vote), although she did not know how widespread the practice was. She asserted that the people being paid probably would not vote for autonomy anyway and that the practice is an old one in Pando. She discounted the impact this would have, noting that both sides already informally pay their supporters as "unfortunately part of our corrupt political culture. This is not about ideology." Opposition PODEMOS party leader and former Bolivian President Tuto Quiroga also told us May 28 that the MAS is paying Pandinos 200 Bolivianos (roughly \$30) to relinquish their IDs over the weekend.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The "Yes" vote will surely pass in Beni. The outcome of the Pando vote will be closer, but the opposition will likely also prevail. If Beni and Pando vote "Yes" as expected, the government will be dealt another serious blow and will need to consider whether it is time to try to reach an accommodation with the opposition-dominated departments or do everything possible to defeat the last scheduled autonomy vote in the Tarija department June 22.
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